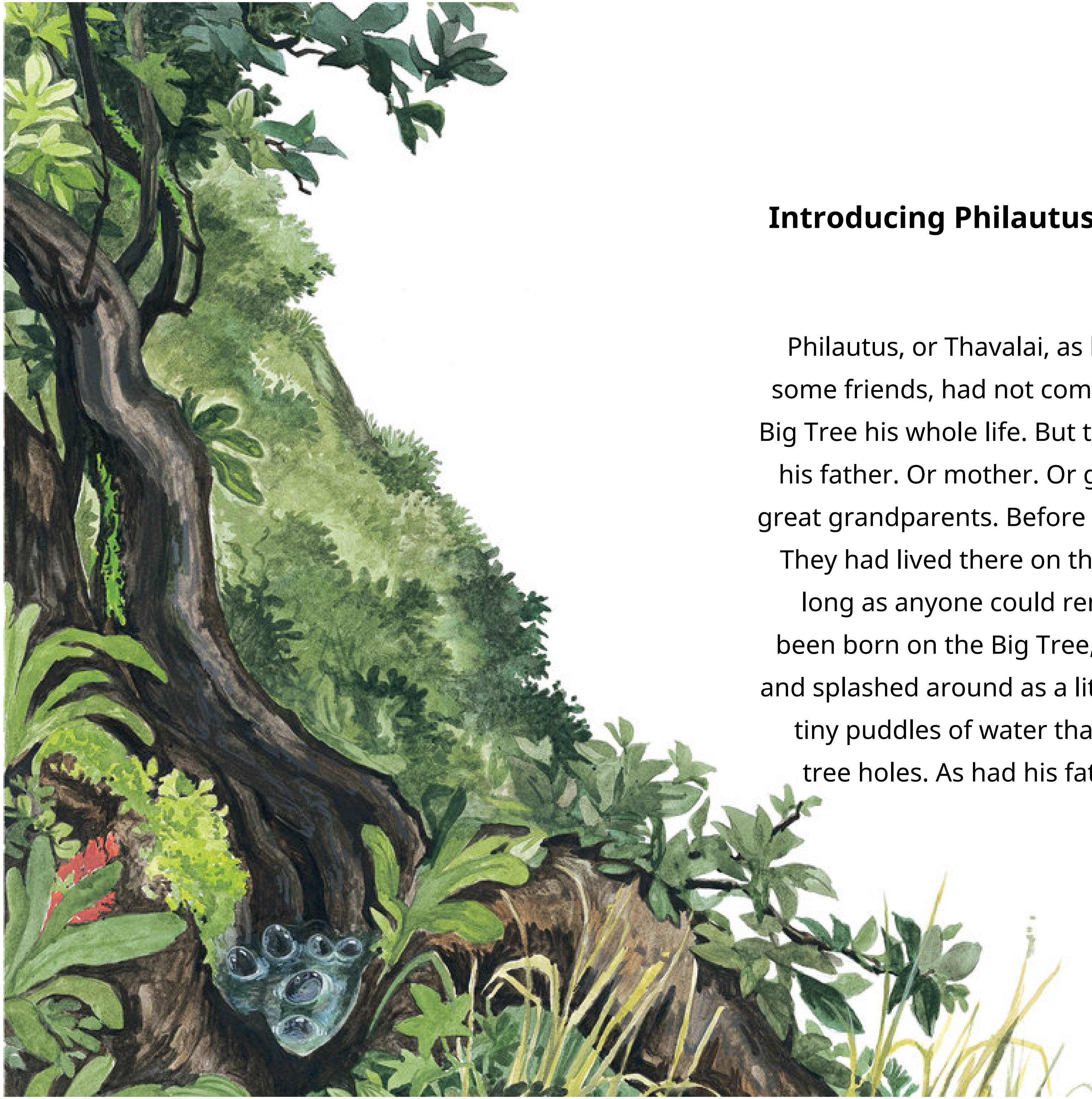


PRATHAM BOOKS
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Level 4

The Adventures of Philautus Frog

Author: Kartik Shanker
Illustrator: Maya Ramaswamy

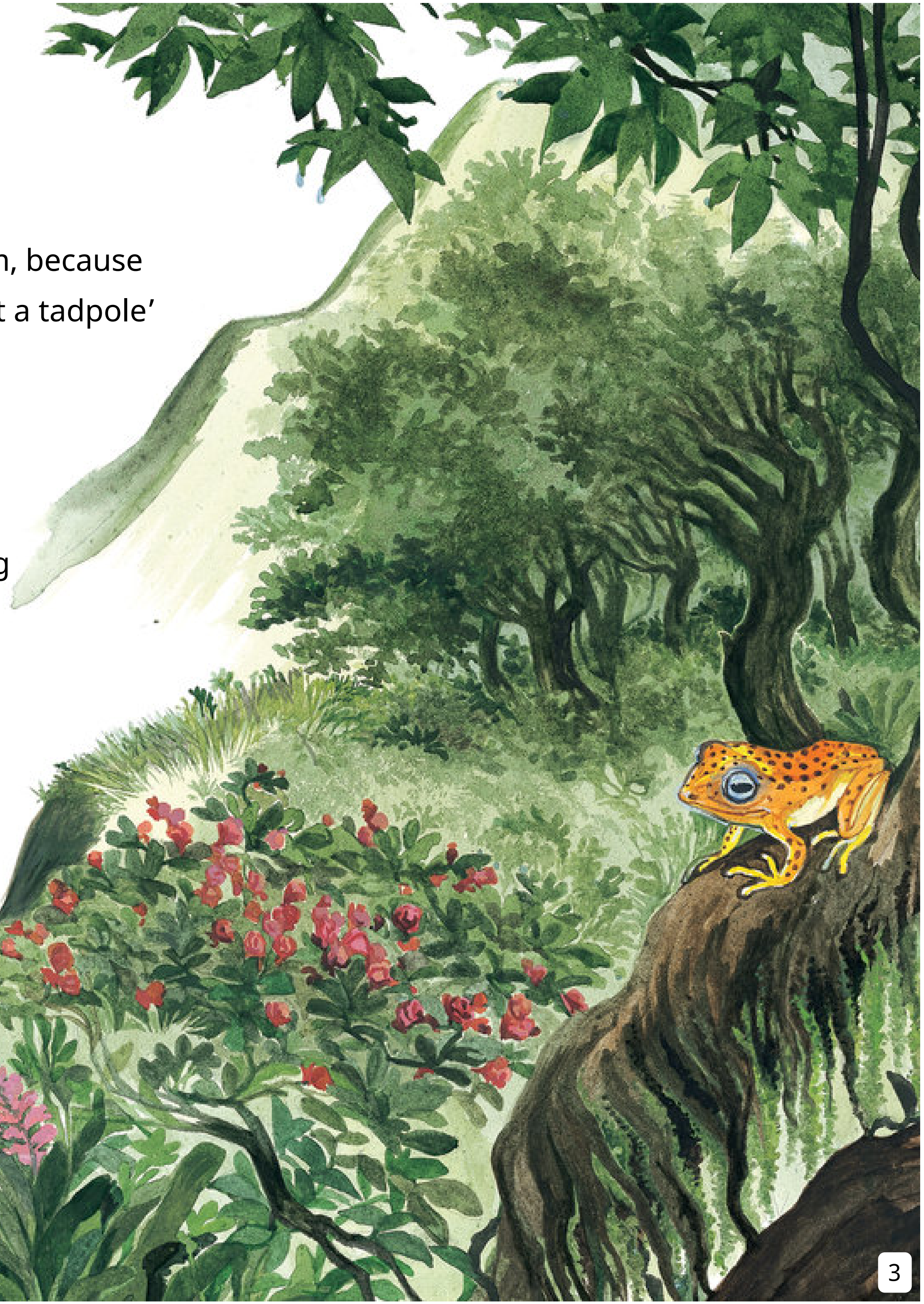


Introducing Philautus, the tree frog

Philautus, or Thavalai, as he was known to some friends, had not come down from the Big Tree his whole life. But then, neither had his father. Or mother. Or grandparents. Or great grandparents. Before that, who knew? They had lived there on the Big Tree for as long as anyone could remember. He had been born on the Big Tree, in a small nook, and splashed around as a little froglet in the tiny puddles of water that collected in the tree holes. As had his father before him.

Sometimes the other frogs made fun of him, because he had never been a tadpole. ‘You were not a tadpole’ they chanted. But Thavalai was a tree frog and proud of it.

The Big Tree was in the middle of a shola forest, a dark, deep and wet forest, dripping with dew, dank with mildew.



Cosy sholas and harsh grasslands

The shola nestled snugly at the bottom of a valley and was surrounded by undulating hills of grassland. Little fingers of shola forest snaked up the hill-slope where rain-fed streams had cut their courses. And as much as the seasons raged out in the grassland, inside the shola it was always cool.

The grassland is a harsh land, Thavalai's father used to say. It's sizzling hot in the day and freezing cold at night. But here in the shola, it's always cool and moist. That's why you must always stay here.





Thavalai and his friends, discussing their world

Thavalai had heard all these names, but he had no idea what these places were. Bhavani, Bangitappal, Sispara, Nadugani, Maduppumalai shola, the shola of folds, and so on.

But he had a few friends who had been around a bit. Warbler flew down from the Himalayas each year and had a bird's-eye view of the whole of the Western Ghats. Of which the Nilgiris was a tiny part. Of which Mukurthi was a section. Of which Sispara was a slice. In which the tree stood.

Thavalai decides to explore the world

When Thavalai heard about the big blue sea from his friends, he knew he had to see it. His frog friends scoffed. Warbler said it was minuscule compared to the seas that she had seen while migrating south in winter.

But Thavalai was determined to go. And one morning, he came down the Big Tree, hopping from branch to branch. He crawled down slowly, toepads gripping the bark till he reached the ground. The soil was moist and covered with dead leaves. A shrew scurried past. Around him, slugs and grubs crawled.

Thavalai was tempted to climb straight back up the Big Tree to the safety of his home. Instead he hopped towards the edge of the shola.





Out in the open

As he got closer to the light, Thavalai’s heart beat faster and faster. What would he find? Was it the end of the world? Or was there an endless supply of food? In other words, frog heaven?

When he got there finally, it was three parts fog and one part frog. A heavy, clammy mist lay over the grassland, and Thavalai could not see anything. And far away, he heard croaking. Slowly, he stepped out on to the grassland for the very first time. The cold surprised him. It was all around, the chill in the wind, the frost on the ground. And instead of a cosy cover of leaf litter, there was nothing but the crackling fronds of grasses.

Briefly the fog cleared and Thavalai saw the most amazing sight. The entire hill opposite was blue. It was covered with a carpet of kurinji, the little shrub which flowered only once in twelve years. And on the edges of the shola were the sturdy rhododendron with their shocking red flowers.

Encounter with Bufo

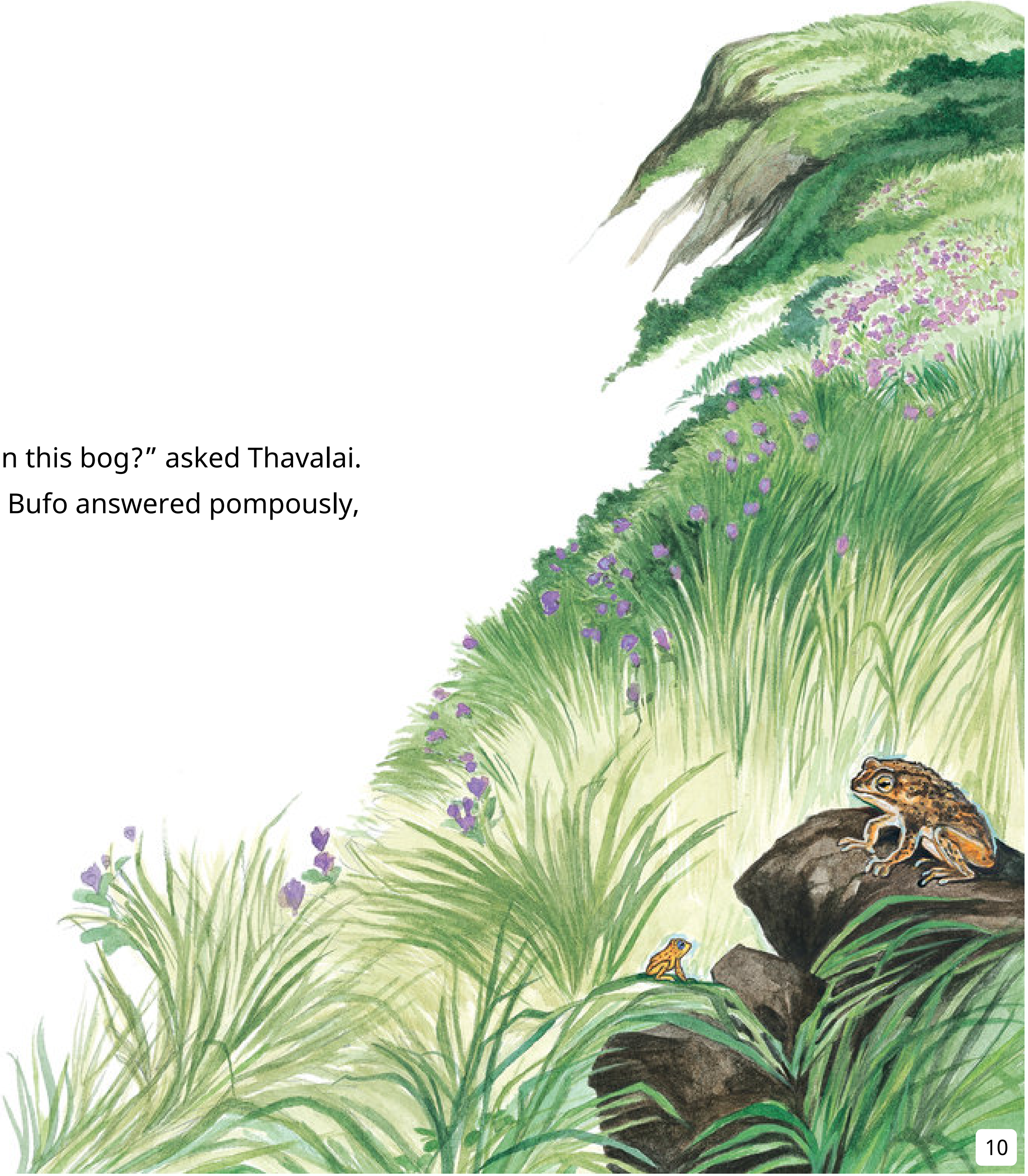
As Thavalai hopped down the hill, he could hear the rushing of water. Within minutes, he came upon a little mountain stream, winding its way down a small hill, decorated with little rocks. And in one of the rocky corners was the biggest frog that Thavalai had ever seen.

Bufo, fat and prosperous, was sitting at the edge of the cold and rocky stream. He looked smug and satisfied with himself. A long cluster of eggs floated in the water, that would soon become little Bufo tadpoles. Bufo and his relatives were found throughout the country. Field, forest or city, you could find Bufo.





“Oh, Giant Frog, do you live in this bog?” asked Thavalai.
“I am a toad, you little runt,” Bufo answered pompously,
“I live everywhere.”



Sally A, the grassland lizard

Sally A was at home in the grassland. Like her relative, the garden lizard, Sally could change colours when she wanted. When Thavalai landed next to her, she turned a green-brown and merged with the grass behind her. After a few minutes, she assured herself that this tiny frog posed no threat, and reappeared.



“Hi there, I’m Thavalai the tree frog and I’m looking for the big blue sea,” Thavalai said. “Let me show you,” said Sally A eagerly and scooted to the top of the hill, Thavalai hopping as fast as he could behind her.

“Go down that hill, and up the next one, and down again, and along the river and over the little hill and you will find the sea,” said she.



Ahaetulla, the grassland snake

Thavalai hopped rapidly down a little path towards the valley they called Bangitappal. He fell through the grass, slid down the rock, skated on the moss, till he was in the middle of the valley. Surrounded by hills and fog, Thavalai felt very lonely. And suddenly he was eye to eye with a creature that frogs fear the most.

Inches away, the long slits of pupils and flickering tongue of a snake looked straight into Thavalai's eyes. Thavalai was transfixed with fear. But Ahaetulla, the grass snake, had had a very fulfilling day. He had just eaten a toad and was done for the week. Languidly, he slithered up to Thavalai and asked how he might help.



Thavalai explained his quest and was rewarded with a flicker of the tongue. Ahaetulla asked Thavalai to follow him up the hill, and said he would show him a path that led straight down to the sea.





Finds the big blue sea

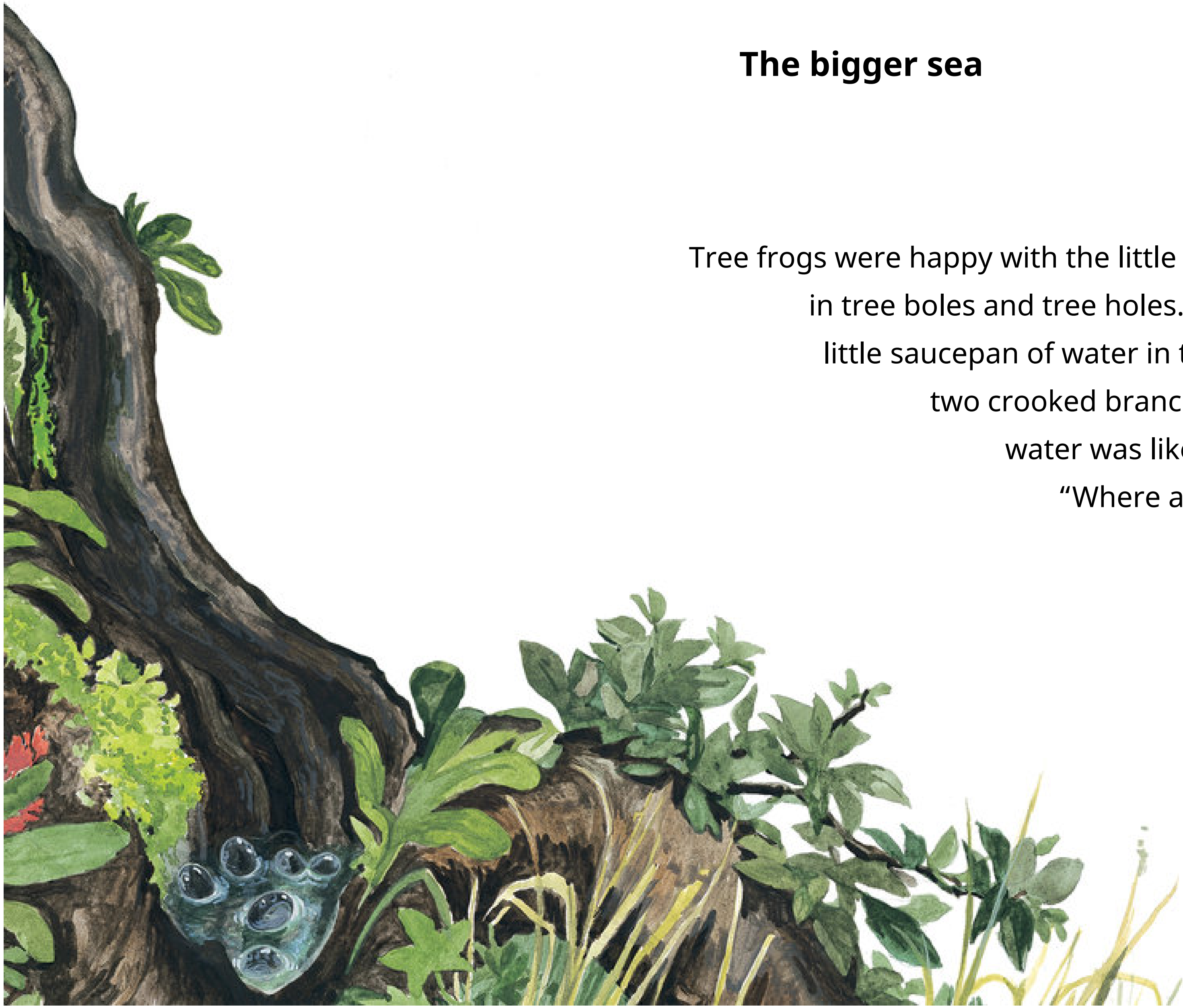
When finally Thavalai looked up, he saw it down in the valley ahead. At last, finally, it lay there in front of him. The big, big blue blue sea, its little fingers snaking into the hills around. Thavalai looked at it in wonder, watching the blueness disappear into the distance and meeting the sky somewhere beyond the lands where animals lived. He hopped down towards it, never quite believing that this was not an illusion, a trick of the the wind and the fog and the sun.



And when finally he did reach it, he laid a tentative toe in the water, as if it might swallow him whole. It was cool and fresh to the touch. And calm, unlike any water that Thavalai had seen before.

The waters in the streams rushed and babbled, and argued and whined, and behaved like juvenile delinquents or raging adults. This quiet wisdom of water he had not seen before.

The bigger sea



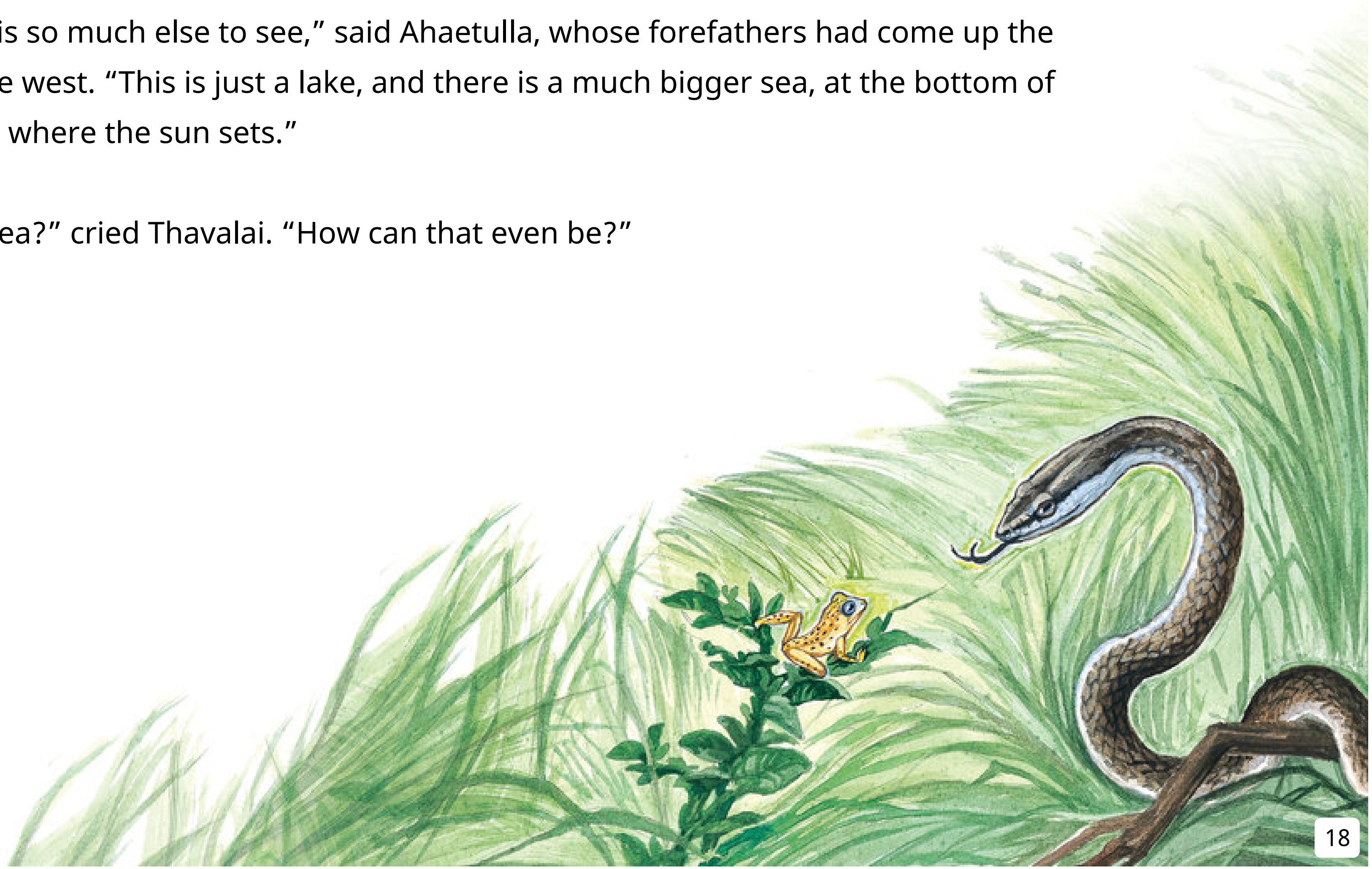
Tree frogs were happy with the little pools that collected in tree boles and tree holes. And compared to a little saucepan of water in the crevice between two crooked branches, this expanse of water was like the universe itself.

"Where are you going now?" Ahaetulla asked.

“I don’t know,” said Thavalai, “I came to see the sea, and now that I have, maybe I’ll go home.”

“But there is so much else to see,” said Ahaetulla, whose forefathers had come up the hill from the west. “This is just a lake, and there is a much bigger sea, at the bottom of mountains, where the sun sets.”

“A bigger sea?” cried Thavalai. “How can that even be?”



Up the western catchment

Up the hill they went, Ahaetulla winding his way up the sinuous path, Thavalai but a few hops behind. They went past a little shola nestled in the cup of the hill's palm. The cinnamon beckoned him, the familiar smells, the warmth, the wetness. The shola is like a sponge, absorbing the torrents of rain, storing it in every crack, crevice and keyhole, absorbing it into its bark, its mud, its rock, and leaking it out bit by bit, through the little streams that rush out.

And then he stopped, because there was a rock in front of him. But it was soft, warm, steaming almost and smelled very strange.

“Elephants,” Ahaetulla said.

“Is this an elephant?” he asked, thinking it was not as impressive as he thought it may have been.

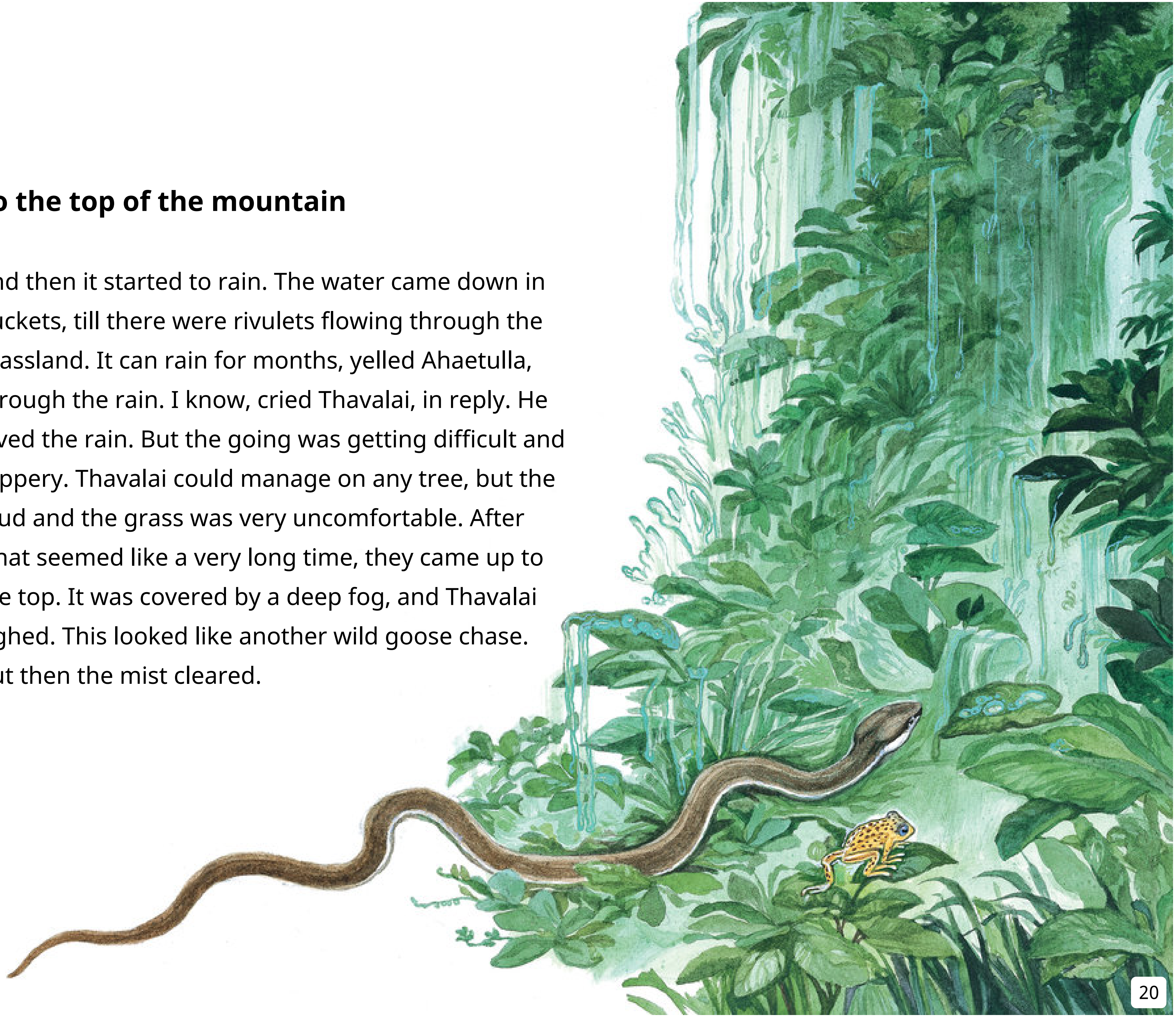
“No, silly, that's just their poop. Elephants are a thousand times your size. Maybe a zillion.”

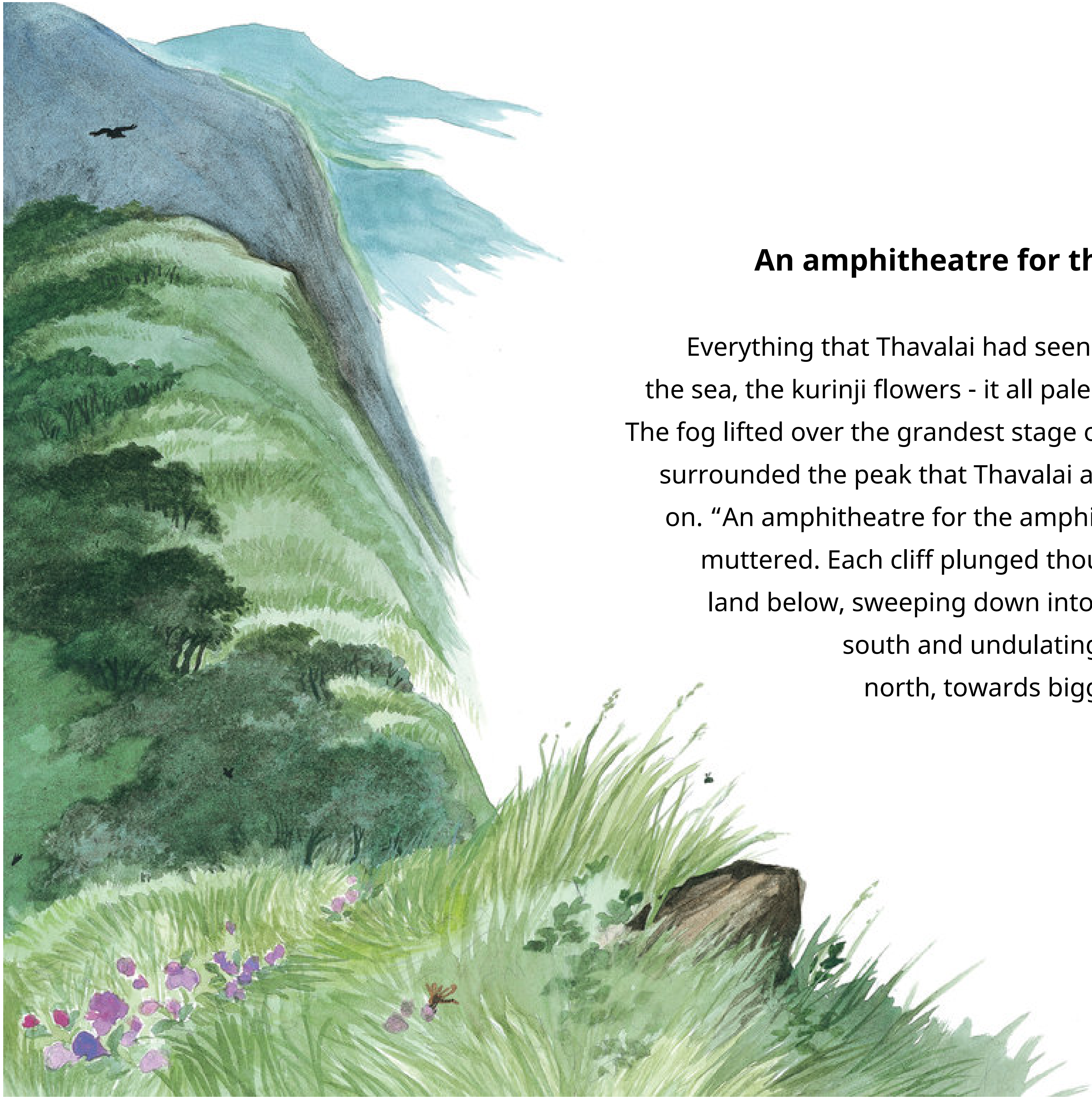
“But how do they get up here?”

“Elephants can go anywhere,” Ahaetulla said mysteriously and went on.

To the top of the mountain

And then it started to rain. The water came down in buckets, till there were rivulets flowing through the grassland. It can rain for months, yelled Ahaetulla, through the rain. I know, cried Thavalai, in reply. He loved the rain. But the going was getting difficult and slippery. Thavalai could manage on any tree, but the mud and the grass was very uncomfortable. After what seemed like a very long time, they came up to the top. It was covered by a deep fog, and Thavalai sighed. This looked like another wild goose chase. But then the mist cleared.

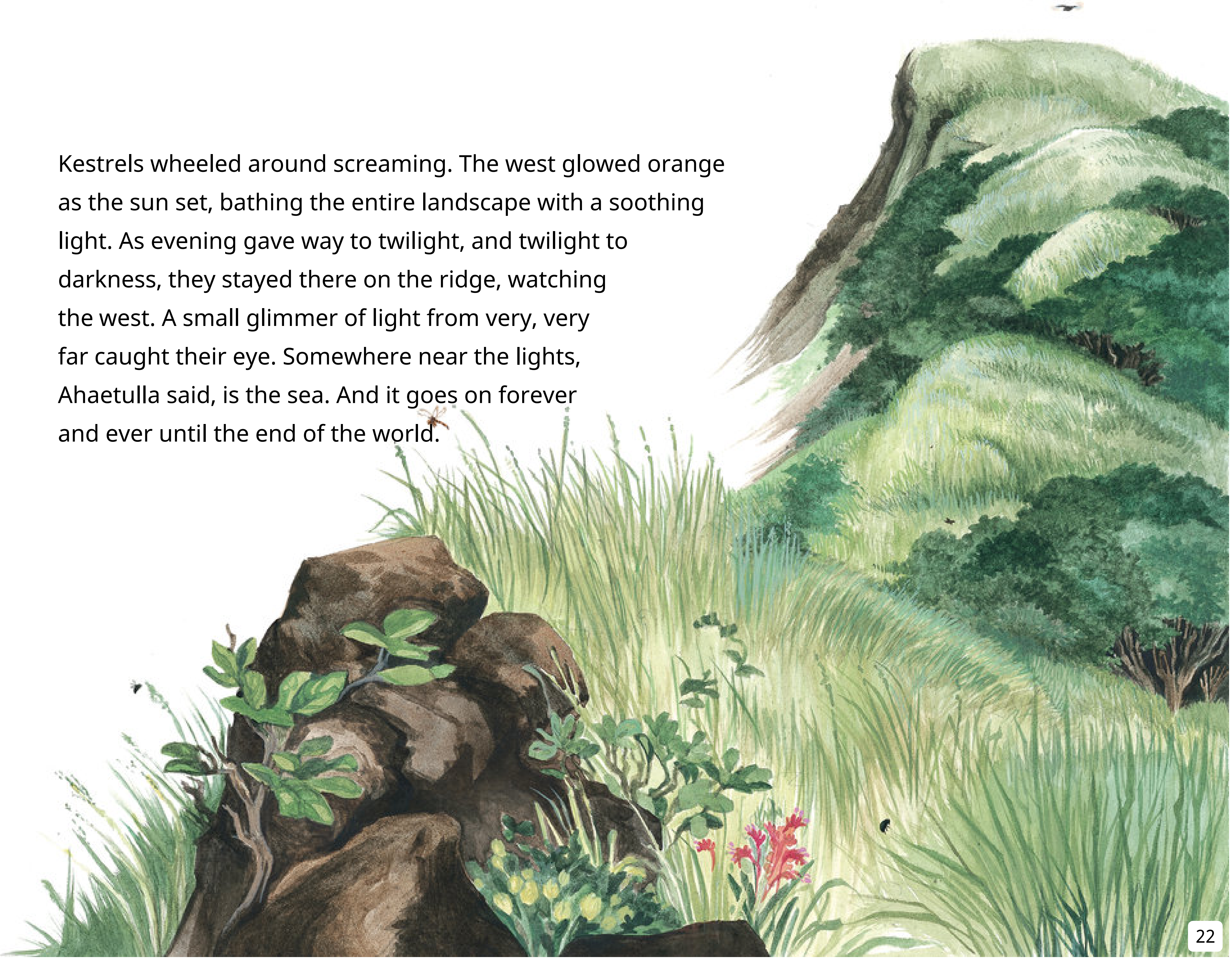




An amphitheatre for the amphibian

Everything that Thavalai had seen so far - the tree, the sea, the kurinji flowers - it all paled in comparison. The fog lifted over the grandest stage of all. Three cliffs surrounded the peak that Thavalai and Ahaetulla sat on. “An amphitheatre for the amphibian,” Ahaetulla muttered. Each cliff plunged thousands of feet to land below, sweeping down into a plateau to the south and undulating lush hills to the north, towards bigger, larger peaks.

Kestrels wheeled around screaming. The west glowed orange as the sun set, bathing the entire landscape with a soothing light. As evening gave way to twilight, and twilight to darkness, they stayed there on the ridge, watching the west. A small glimmer of light from very, very far caught their eye. Somewhere near the lights, Ahaetulla said, is the sea. And it goes on forever and ever until the end of the world.

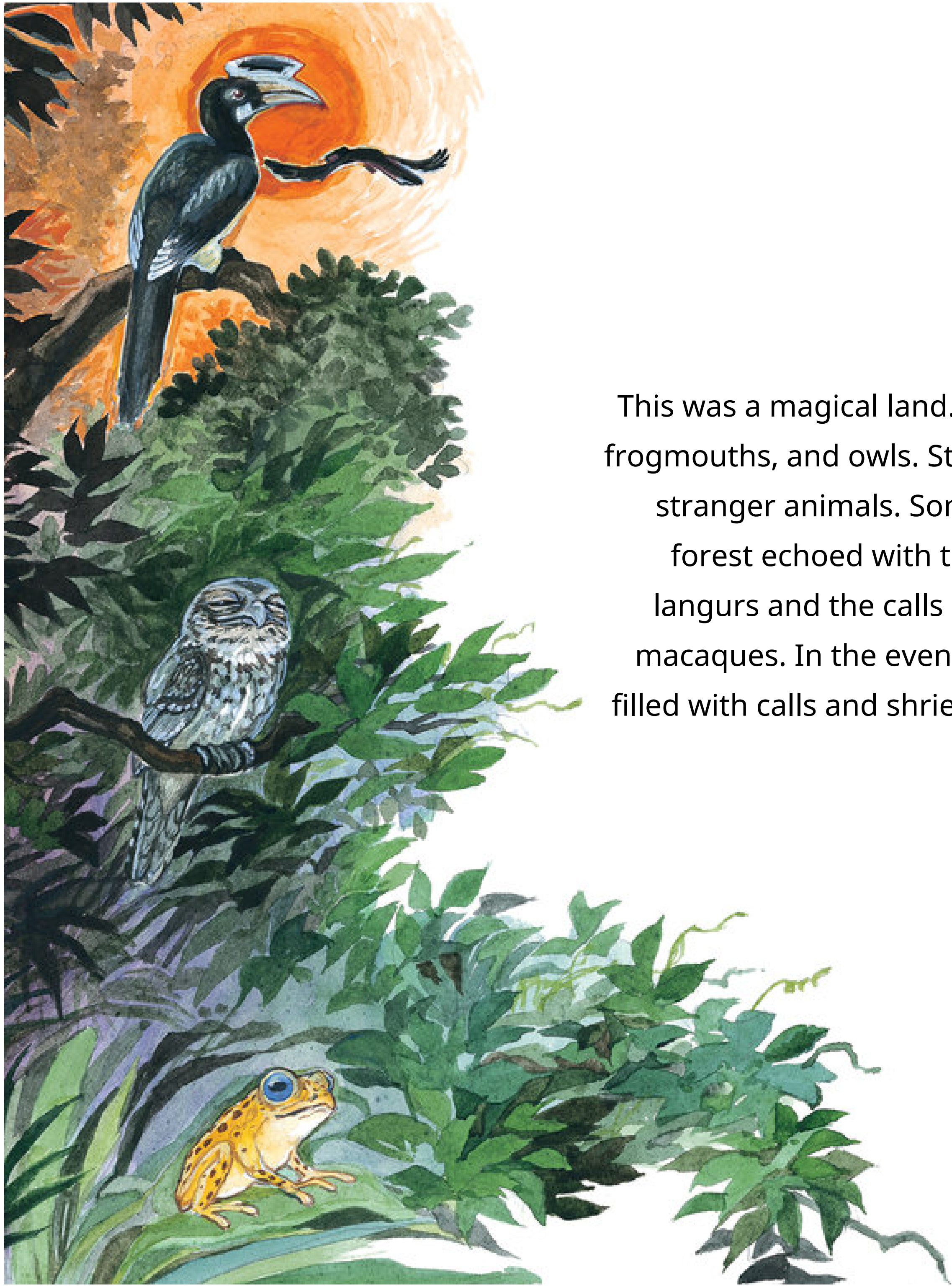




Heads down the hill to the silent valley

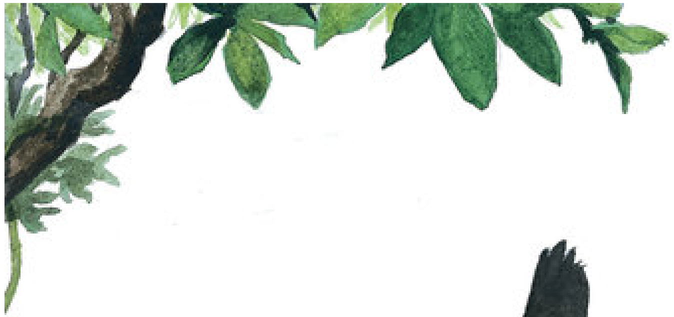
Thavalai made up his mind to go on to the big sea, but Ahaetulla would go no further. He pointed him to the Silent Valley.

Thavalai wondered why it had been given this name. But after he had been in it for a while, he began to realize why. It was quiet as a tomb. And the trees were tall, unlike in the sholas above. And the lower he descended, the taller they became.



This was a magical land. With hornbills, frogmouths, and owls. Strange birds and stranger animals. Sometimes, the forest echoed with the hoots of langurs and the calls of lion-tailed macaques. In the evening, the forest filled with calls and shrieks and squeaks.







Some new froggy friends

High above in the canopy, Thavalai could hear the sounds of the birds, ones that he had seen flying around the Big Tree at home. He saw many frogs like Nycti, the torrent frog, who loved the water-washed rocks as their home. They clung to the wet surface as the rapids splashed and smashed against the rocks, and called from the cracks and laid their eggs on the wet leaves that overhung the streams.

At this time, he heard the strangest sound that he had ever heard. It seemed to come from deep within the earth. But that could not be. It sounded so like a frog, and yet not like a frog.



The balloon frog incident

Then he saw it lumbering towards him, the strangest animal he had ever seen. It seemed quite amorphous and shapeless, purple like rich humus earth. It seemed to flow forward, rather than walk or jump, almost as if it was the mud itself come to life in a strange frog form. Apart from its pointy pig snout, Thavalai could make out no other feature.

From the safety of his root haven, Thavalai called out to the creature. Alarmed, it swelled up like a balloon, and looked around with its beady eyes.

“Who are you?” Thavalai ventured.

Looking at him carefully, the ancient creature answered, “I am the oldest frog of the forest. My ancestors came here long before anyone else. They call me Nasika. I live deep inside the earth most of the time.”

“It must be lonely down there, and dark and scary,” said Thavalai.

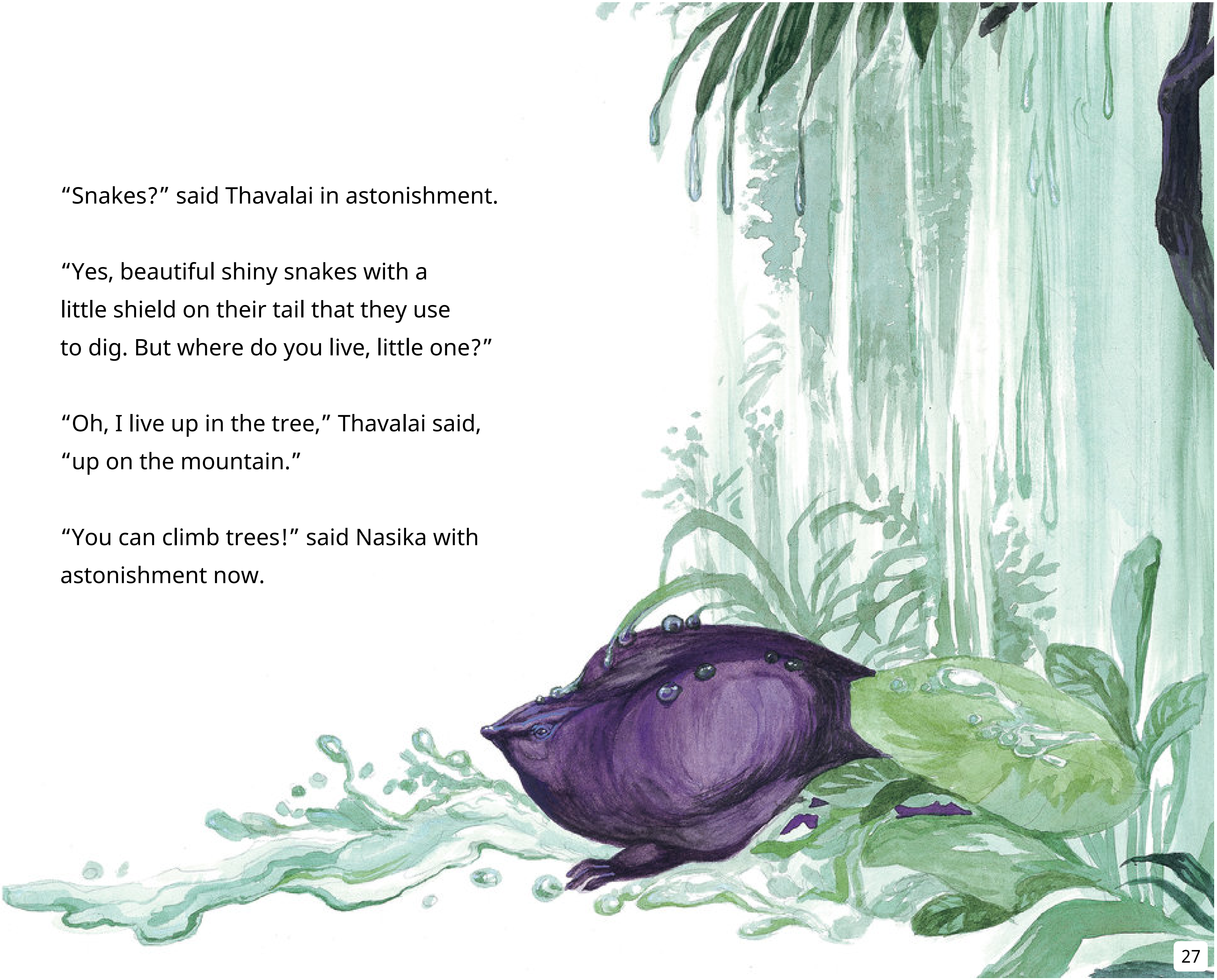
Nasika smiled, as much as her narrow mouth would allow. “It’s a busy world down there,” she said. “There are earthworms, and bugs and beetles, and spiders, and cockroaches, and scorpions. And even snakes.”

“Snakes?” said Thavalai in astonishment.

“Yes, beautiful shiny snakes with a little shield on their tail that they use to dig. But where do you live, little one?”

“Oh, I live up in the tree,” Thavalai said, “up on the mountain.”

“You can climb trees!” said Nasika with astonishment now.



Flying frogs, lizards and snakes

Thavalai decided to climb up a tree to get a breath of fresh sky and plan his next hop, step and jump. He climbed till he reached the canopy. A cloud overhung the valley, little wisps of smoke lingering over the treetops, little rings of cloud hanging like halos over wizened trees.

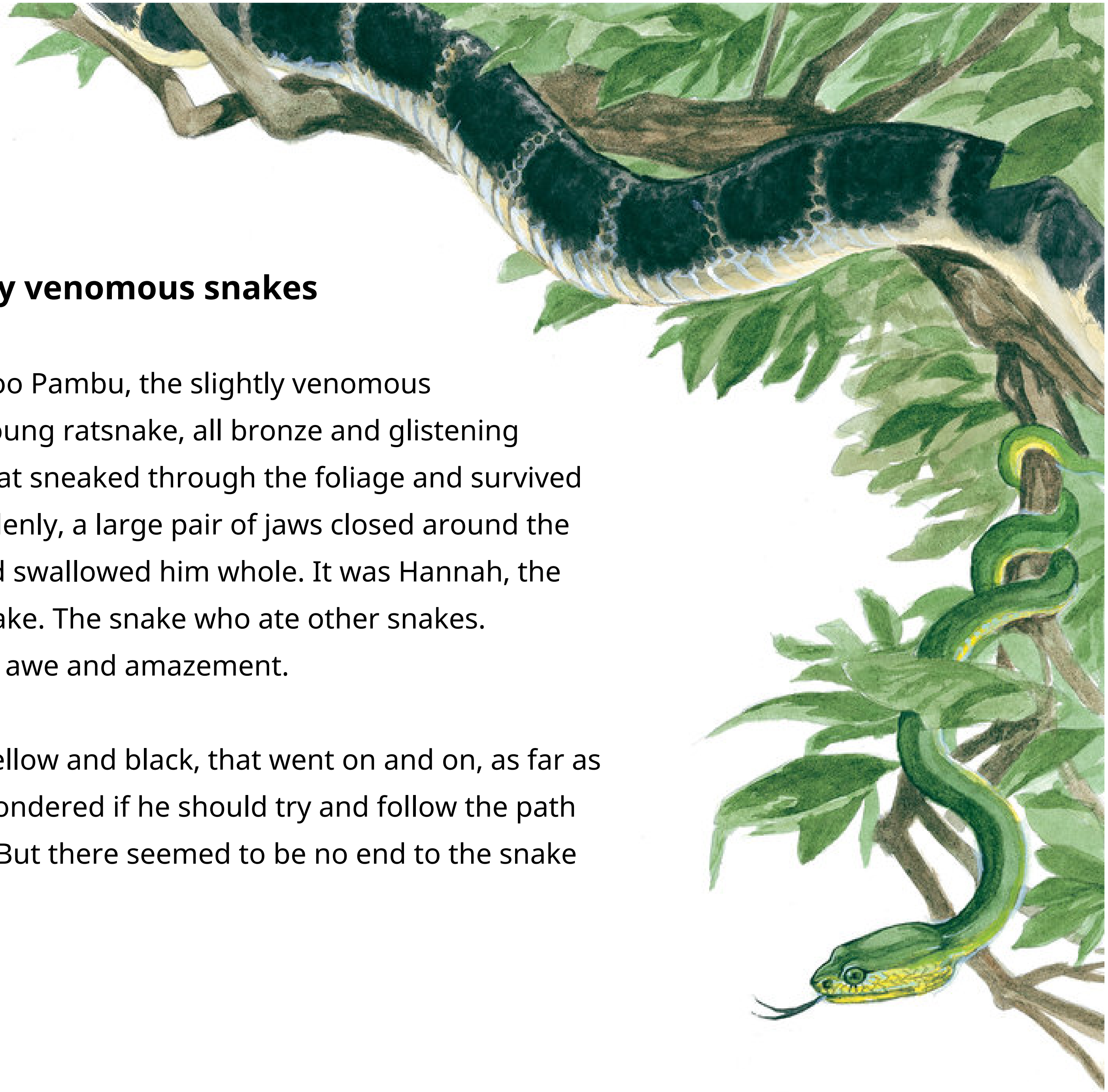
Thavalai’s reverie was interrupted by streaks of colour flying by. Thavalai thought these were more birds, but all of a sudden, a frog landed next to him.





A flying frog, he marveled. “I’m Rhaco,” said the flying frog. Soon, Rhaco’s friend, Draco, the flying lizard and Chrysopelea, the flying snake came gliding down to join them, and they engaged in a frenzy of jumping and gliding.

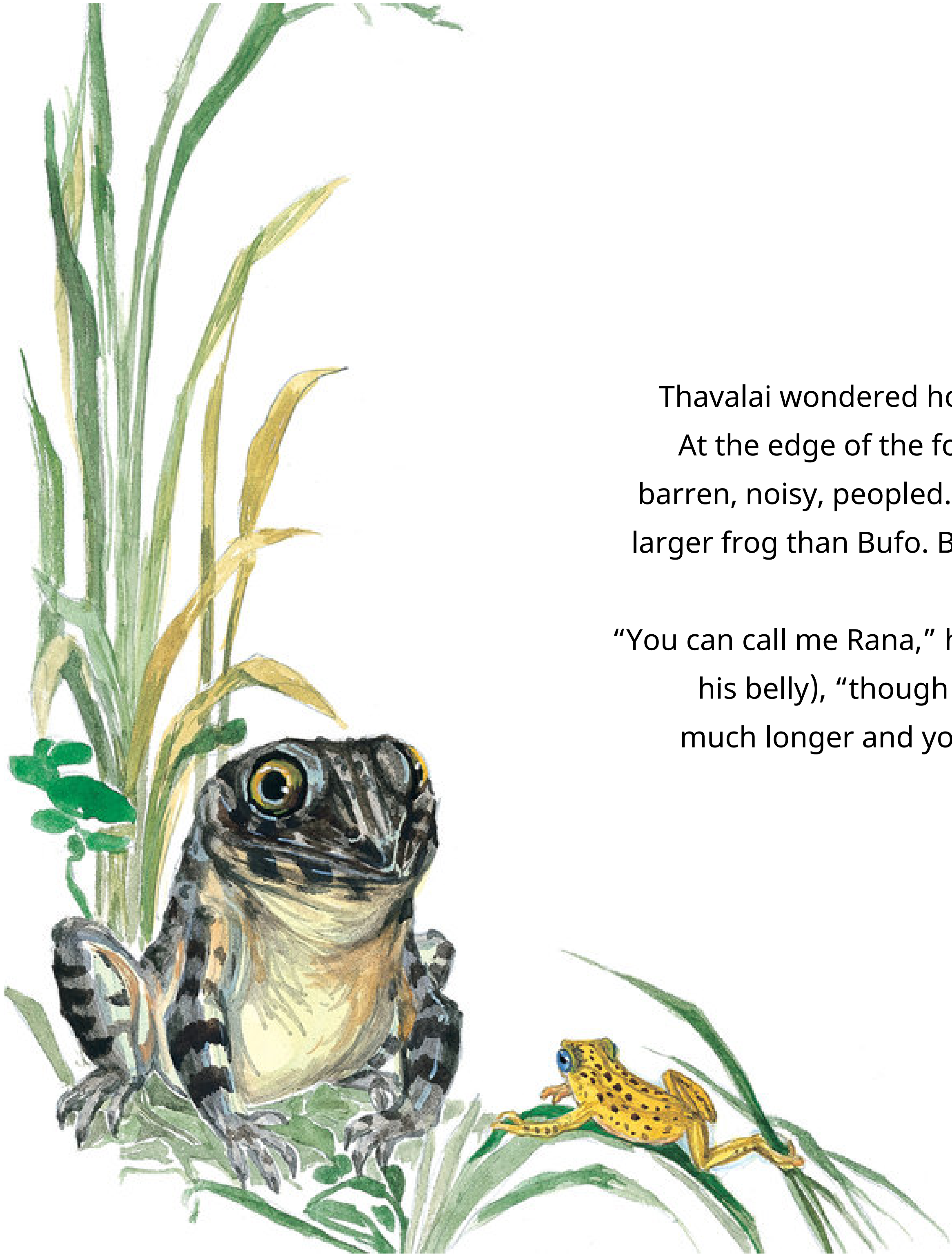




The slightly and very venomous snakes

Thavalai also met Bamboo Pambu, the slightly venomous snake. Later, he saw a young ratsnake, all bronze and glistening in the rays of sunlight that sneaked through the foliage and survived the maze of leaves. Suddenly, a large pair of jaws closed around the head of the ratsnake and swallowed him whole. It was Hannah, the extremely venomous snake. The snake who ate other snakes. Thavalai looked at her in awe and amazement.

Hannah was a striking yellow and black, that went on and on, as far as his eyes could see. He wondered if he should try and follow the path to the end of the snake. But there seemed to be no end to the snake called Hannah!



The philosophy of Rana

Thavalai wondered how much further he would need to go. At the edge of the forest, everything looked very strange - barren, noisy, peopled. At the edge of a field, he met an even larger frog than Bufo. But he had a really pleasant disposition.

“You can call me Rana,” he said, giving him a hug (and rubbing his belly), “though its not my real name. My real name is much longer and you would have trouble pronouncing it.”



Rana told him that the sea was far away, and the path held too many dangers. And too few trees. Where once there was forest, there was now field, or city. The real sea was not friendly to frogs, nor was the path to it.

“Little seas at home are as grand as big seas in other worlds,” he said.

Rana told him that maybe it was time for him to go home after all
his adventures.



Thavalai goes home

Thavalai had learnt that the world was a strange and dangerous place. He did not like the fast torrents that Nycti lived in, nor could he live under the soil like Nasika. He liked the top of trees. On the tops of mountains.

And now it was time to return there. Philautus Frog did not go around the world. But he went as far as any tree frog from the Big Tree had ever gone in a very long time. Thavalai, the tree frog turned towards the hills and set off again to go back to his friends and family on the Big Tree.







Information

The Western Ghats:

The Western Ghats are a long chain of mountains running along the west coast of India from the southern tip of the peninsula to the River Tapti in Maharashtra.

Sholas and grasslands:

In the southern Western Ghats, the tops of the mountains have a unique habitat which consists of undulating plains of grasslands, with small patches of evergreen forests with stunted trees, known as sholas.

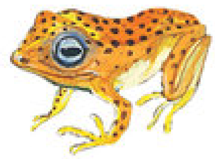
Frogs and toads:

A toad is actually a kind of frog. Toads generally have a dry and warty skin. They tend to be more terrestrial than most other frogs, but usually lay their eggs in the water.

Scientific names:

Plants and animals are known by scientific names which consist of a genus and species (Eg. *Homo sapiens* for humans). Scientific names sometimes change on the basis of new discoveries about taxonomy and evolution.

Cast of Characters (in order of appearance)



Philautus: Philautus are a group of tree frogs or bush frogs found in India, Sri Lanka and South East Asia. Unlike other frogs, most species belonging to this group lay eggs that undergo direct development. That is, they bypass the tadpole stage and little froglets hop out of the eggs! Most bush frogs of the Western Ghats now belong to the genus Raorchestes.



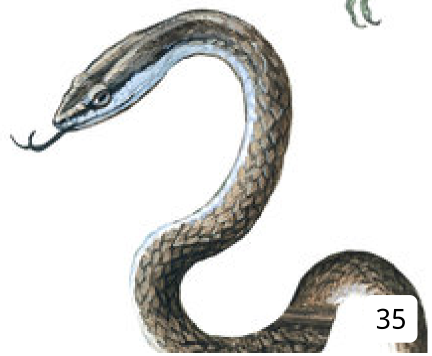
Bufo: Bufo is a genus of toads. The common toad in India was long known by the scientific name, Bufo melanostictus; it is now called Duttaphrynus melanostictus.

Sally A:

Salea are agamid lizards, part of the same family as the garden lizards, Calotes.



Ahaetulla: Ahaetulla is a genus of grass snakes. The common vine snake, which is found all over India, is also a species that belongs to the genus Ahaetulla.



Nasika: The frog, Nasikabatracus sahyadrensis, was discovered only a few years ago. It is believed to be one of the oldest frogs in India, which means it has remained relatively unchanged for over 100 million years. Its closest relatives live in Seychelles.

Nycti:
Nyctibatrachus are torrent frogs which live in fast-flowing streams in the Western Ghats.

Rhaco: Rhacophorus are also tree frogs, and some are known for their gliding ability; they build foam nests attached to leaves hanging over water bodies.

Draco:
Draco is a lizard and Chrysopelea is a snake, both known for their gliding ability.

Hannah: The king cobra, or Ophiophagus hannah, is the world's longest venomous snake and feeds exclusively on other snakes.

Bamboo Pambu:
This refers to the common and mildly venomous bamboo pit viper.

Rana: Rana is a genus of frogs, now known by several different names. The bull frog, once called Rana tigerina, is now called Hoplobatrachus tigerinus. It is the largest frog in India.

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The Adventures of Philautus Frog
(English)

Philautus, the little tree frog wants to see the wide blue sea, so far away from his home on Big Tree, in the middle of a forest. Take a magnificent trek with Philautus across the Western Ghats teeming with creatures that are funny, fat and fascinating. Seasoned with humour, this lush book reveals the splendours of the wild through a compelling tale.

This is a Level 4 book for children who can read fluently and with confidence.

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